

*Letter from Caroline Herschel (1750-1848)*

William is away, and I am minding  
the heavens. I have discovered  
eight new comets and three nebulae  
never before seen by man,  
and am preparing an Index to  
Flamsteed's observations, together with  
a catalogue of 560 stars omitted from  
the British Catalogue, plus a list of errata  
in that publication. William says

I have a way with numbers, so I handle  
all the necessary reductions and  
calculations. I also plan  
every night's observation  
schedule, for he says my intuition  
helps me turn the telescope to discover  
star cluster after star cluster.

I have helped him polish the mirrors  
and lenses of our new telescope. It is  
the largest in existence. Can you imagine  
the thrill of turning it to some new  
corner of the heavens to see  
something never seen  
from earth? I actually like  
that he is busy with the Royal society  
and his club, for when I finish my other work  
I can spend all night sweeping  
the heavens.

Sometimes when I am alone  
in the dark, and the universe reveals  
yet another secret, I say the names  
of my long lost sisters, forgotten  
in the books that record  
our science—

Aganice of Thessaly,  
Hyptia,  
Hildegard,  
Catherina Hevelius,  
Maria Agnesi

—as if the stars themselves could  
remember. Did you know that Hildegard  
proposed a heliocentric universe  
300 years before Copernicus? that she  
wrote of universal gravitation 500 years

before Newton? But who would listen  
to her? She was just a nun, a woman.  
What is our age, if that age was dark?  
As for my name, it will also be  
forgotten, but I am not accused  
of being a sorceress, like Aganice,  
and the Christians do not threaten to  
drag me to church, to murder me, like they did  
Hyptia of Alexandria, the eloquent, young  
woman who devised the instruments  
used to accurately measure the position  
and motion of heavenly bodies.  
However long we live, life is short, so I  
work. And however important man becomes,  
he is nothing compared to the stars.  
There are secrets, dear sister, and it is  
for us to reveal them. Your name, like mine,  
is a song. Write soon,  
Caroline

by Siv Cedering (1985)

